

# Teaching National Narratives and Values in Australian Schools

## What do students really think about Australian identity and character?

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### Introduction

In 2004 Prime Minister John Howard and his then Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, launched the National Framework for Values Education. Thirty-one billion dollars of federal education funding was given to its implementation, yet this ‘investment in Australia’s future’ was dogged by persistent public and political debate.<sup>1</sup> The sentiment of the framework was not itself controversial. Its nine values – care and compassion, doing your best, fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility, and understanding, tolerance and inclusion – are undoubtedly sincere.<sup>2</sup> The problem lay in how the federal government assumed these values and Australia’s history were innate and uncontested, precluding debate about them in the classroom.<sup>3</sup>

This paper critically explores the ways in which students engage with Australian identity in their history classes. The first section of the paper discusses the National Framework for Values Education following its re-launch in 2005. In particular, it examines the ways the framework became tied to an exclusive understanding of Australia’s national character in public debate. The second section of the paper shifts to the classroom and argues that history teachers and students have a critical contribution to make in this debate over how to teach Australian values.

The paper draws on some initial findings from a large qualitative research project into the current state of history teaching and curriculum development across Australia. The project involved interviews with over 200 history teachers and students from each of the states and territories about their understandings of Australian history.<sup>4</sup> These ‘voices from the classroom’ are used to compare public debates over teaching Australian identity and values with the way students and teachers themselves engage with these issues through their history classes. I do not contend that students overwhelmingly reject the legacy of Australia’s national values – far from it – but the range of their responses suggests any one reading of Australia’s national heritage and identity simply cannot encompass diverse

engagement with these issues.<sup>5</sup> While there is certainly powerful political and public pressure to define an uplifting ‘national character’ for young people, I argue there is *even more* value in letting them analyse such ideas themselves. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, many of them say just that.

### Simpson and his values

The Values Framework was by no means the first attempt to define Australia’s values and democratic institutions. The growth of civics and citizenship education during the lead-up to the centenary of federation in 2001, for example, produced significant support material for teachers and broad-ranging public discussions about the need to encourage students to respect and engage with national values, heritage and identity.<sup>6</sup> Yet the public debate surrounding the framework, particularly after it was re-launched by Brendan Nelson following the 2005 London terrorist bombings in 2005, was far from bi-partisan. Instead of facilitating a widespread public consideration of values education, the framework became tied to a politicised and exclusive debate over ‘Australianness’.

When Nelson re-launched the National Framework he explicitly linked the statement of values with Australia’s proud military history. The values represented by Australian soldiers in the Great War had given rise to a founding national myth and identity, and Nelson’s comments at the re-launch gave an insight into the way the values framework was tied to this unique expression of ‘Australianness’. Nelson designed a poster of the values ‘and over the top of it’, he said, ‘I’ve superimposed Simpson and his donkey as an example of what’s at the heart of our national sense of emerging identity’.<sup>7</sup> The heroic story of John Simpson Kirkpatrick and his donkey rescuing wounded soldiers at Gallipoli was the essence of our national character, Nelson insisted, ‘and he represents everything that’s at the heart of what it means to be an Australian’.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Nelson described an unbroken bond between teaching Australian values today and the iconic image of the Anzacs, many students I have spoken with for this research project sketched a continuum of na-

tional identity that emerged during the Great War and still guides Australians today. The national character Nelson described with such veneration has powerful resonances for many students, it seems, who similarly view this militarised identity as intrinsically Australian. Ryan, a Year 12 student at a public school on the New South Wales Central Coast, identified strongly with Australia's military history. 'Gallipoli was a defining moment in our history', he said. 'I know it sounds clichéd, but we need to develop a sense of who we are. It's important to know what our heritage was.'<sup>9</sup> At a Catholic boys' school in Adelaide Declan described his connection in similar terms: 'Most people say that you shape the country with the way you fight your battles and what comes from that. People are always talking about Australia's freedom is because [sic] we fought at Gallipoli and World War II.' He also wondered whether it was a topic that more boys than girls would connect with: 'I don't know, maybe it's just boys and guns, and we could kind of relate to it as eighteen year-old guys going to war for the country'.<sup>10</sup>

Yet boys were not the only ones to speak with such reverence. When I asked a group of Year 10 students from a public school in Hobart whether they enjoyed learning about Australia's war history, it was the girls who spoke up first. Julia said that she likes the topic 'because they're fighting for *us*. If they weren't fighting at Gallipoli, we wouldn't be where we are today'.<sup>11</sup> At another Hobart school, the girls were just as positive. Ali thought that 'our culture is really shaped by that [the wars]. Even though it seems a long time ago, you can relate certain aspects of the Anzac legend today'. Her classmate Deslie agreed: 'Like the whole "mateship" and everything, it's so Aussie'.<sup>12</sup>

The language that these young Australians use to describe their sense of national self is very similar to the way Nelson explained the importance of the values framework: both consider 'being Australian' as an uninterrupted (and uncomplicated) state of national belonging. Such interest is just as powerful outside the classroom, as Bruce Scates revealed in his study of Gallipoli pilgrimages: thousands of young Australians flock to Gallipoli every year to commemorate Anzac Day as part of organised backpacker tours; schools lead history study tours to Turkey and the Western Front; and government-sponsored history competitions for students, such as the Simpson Prize, offer trips to Gallipoli for the winners.<sup>13</sup>

Research conducted by Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton confirms this public interest. Their *Australians and the Past* study involved interviews with hundreds of people from around the country. Respondents mentioned Anzac Day around three times as often as Australia Day or other anniversaries.<sup>14</sup> Yet as Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward have asked, is our Anzac affection really undisputed?<sup>15</sup> Despite the growing popularity of all things Anzac, historians such as Marilyn Lake and Clare Wright have criticised Australia's current political climate for enshrining what they sense is a conservative commemoration of our past. 'John Howard's efforts to militarise Australian historical

memory', Lake suggests, has pushed war anniversaries to the fore of our national calendar.<sup>16</sup> Irrespective of party politics, Lake's point is salient: Anzac Day is 'good' politics. It is a powerful public commemoration where national myth and Australian history have become inextricably entwined.

Such criticisms have not been restricted to the academy, however. While a number of students highlight the significance of the Anzac Legend in defining Australia's national identity and values, connections with this national idea are far from universal. Indeed, some of my interview subjects did not endorse such uncomplicated affiliations with the past. At a senior high school in Perth, for example, Maddison reacted quite critically to Australia's military history 'because it was all the "shaping of the Australian spirit", and it just didn't make any sense to me'. His classmate Hugh expressed similar sentiments: 'I think it's quite hard for our generation to see Australians as being shaped by war, because we've never really lived through a war, and we don't identify Australians as people who have been shaped by war. But we're constantly told that we are and it's a bit hard to actually comprehend'.<sup>17</sup>

Perspectives such as these raise important questions about the place of contrasting opinions in the history classroom. I do not doubt the worthy attempts in the National Framework to articulate the importance of values, per se. Nor do I think that students' connections to their national history can or should be dismissed. Rather, the political and popular equation of these values with 'Australianness' – to the exclusion of all else – runs the risk of reducing the sentiment of the framework to a restrictive nationalism that cannot accommodate the diversity of views within any one classroom, let alone the nation itself.

### Taking the critique into the classroom

Educationists have spent decades analysing and explaining the critical importance of learning history as a discipline, rather than simply a national story with a collection of supporting facts. Programs developed by the British School Council's History 13-16 Project in the 1970s demonstrated that school students are able to deal with complex and competing ideas about history.<sup>18</sup> More recently, North American scholars such as Linda Levstik and Peter Seixas have insisted that history teaching include different perspectives and approaches. Why is it, Levstik asked, that in the midst of such overt public historical disagreements, a multiplicity of stories is rarely taught in schools?<sup>19</sup> Seixas also strongly rejects teaching a fixed national story: 'it would be self-defeating to attempt to resolve these arguments before we get into the classroom, in order to provide students with a finished truth. Rather, we need to bring the arguments into the classroom'.<sup>20</sup>

These important studies of history education seek to foster and encourage the development of historical consciousness among students. The work of Seixas, in particular, as well as Sam Wineburg in the USA and Peter Lee in the UK, helps explain history as something we 'do', rather than simply 'what happened'.<sup>21</sup> Terms

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such as ‘historical literacy’ are also gaining increasing currency in the discipline, revealing the complexity of historical understanding and engagement beyond any narrow or simplistic national account of the past.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean ‘the facts’ are not important, or that ‘the nation’ cannot be taught. Rather, history is all that *and* much, much more – and that requires the development of students’ skills and insights into the past: dealing with multiple perspectives; reconciling the values of the past with the present; and thinking about how history is represented. Such discussions about the complexity of history education provide a key to dealing with ideas about nationalism and national values in the classroom itself.

To that end, the views of history teachers and students have a critical contribution to make in this debate over how to teach Australian values. My research shows that, much like the public arena, there is a substantial diversity of opinion among students and teachers in their history classes. While many students positively identified with Australia’s Anzac story and the values it instilled in their interviews, others sensed that very same history offered a more complex message. Consequently, any reading of the Values Framework should facilitate the discussion of these contrasting views in class, rather than simply encouraging positive (but ultimately limited) expressions of national identity.

At her school in Adelaide, Ophelia, a Year 11 student, explained how she had enjoyed being able to critique and discuss the significance of Australia’s Anzac heroes in class precisely because they raised difficult questions about national values and identity. ‘I think for me what was interesting was we got onto Australian identity’, she said. ‘And, because everyone’s like, “Oh yeah, the digger, that is a true Australian”, we sort of went through and decided if we agreed with the principles that everyone thinks what an Australian is.’<sup>23</sup>

For Cameron in Perth, encouraging his students to engage with these different perspectives was critical to examining Australia’s national character and identity: ‘We have a look at the importance and significance of Anzac Day in Australian history as well and we have a look at the contribution of Anzac Day to creating a sense of Australian Identity’, he said. ‘At the same time we also challenge the issue of Anzac Day and we get them to really analyse it and not just have a look at what I guess the media would like us to think about Anzac Day.’<sup>24</sup> Jenny, a teacher in Brisbane, suggested that her students also enjoy thinking about these ‘points of contrast’, which they ‘often hold onto in terms of differing opinions and how things are repre-

sented differently by different sources’.<sup>25</sup>

A number of students described their engagement with this history in terms of these ‘points of contrast’. Jiang, a Year 11 student from Brisbane, enjoyed studying Australians at war because ‘there are a lot of different perspectives from which you can actually look at it’. Like Ophelia, she appreciated the different points of view her teacher brought to the topic. In ‘primary school they tell you “This is what happened, this is what our men were like, and this is just the basic idea”. Whereas now it’s like, “Did this really happen?” and just the whole critical thinking thing that’s been incorporated.’<sup>26</sup>

In other words, while many students feel strongly connected to the legacy of the Anzac Legend, others do not want a parochial Anzac story. At a public school on the Central Coast, these students were certainly mixed in their response:

*Have you ever studied Australians at war?*

Jenny: We’re doing that now in Year 9.

Caleb: I’ve found that Gallipoli is really glorified in the course.

Ryan: It does get a bit more kind of clarified in the higher years in the course that we’re doing now.

Les: The compulsory course is a bit of a one-sided topic.

Cate: It’s very Australian.

Caleb: Yeah, it’s very, very Australian, which is fair enough, because we’re learning Australian history, but you’ve also got to have the other side because war is not one side – especially in the case of the First World War. It wasn’t our war. Europe started it, and if you don’t learn the European background of it, you’ve got no real knowledge about Australia’s involvement.<sup>27</sup>

While Caleb, Cate and Les think their history course is narrowly Australian in its focus, Ryan has enjoyed studying the topic, and thinks it has become more ‘clarified’ in senior years. As they continued their discussion it became clear that they would not come to a defining image of Australia’s history and identity – and I do not think they should be forced to. In the end, their discussion highlighted how students are perfectly able to disagree, to debate, and to work out their own positions in class.

In fact, several teachers explained how they try to achieve this ‘balance’ in their history classes. At a public high school in Adelaide, Lara says that she always teaches about Australia’s war history ‘and the

students enjoy it', but 'I won't teach it as a wonderful promotion of the Anzac Legend', she adds. 'I mean, that is part of it and it shaped our national identity, but there are parts of that national identity that are not all that great, you know, there's negative and positive aspects, and I would always teach a balance in my class.'<sup>28</sup> Andrew, a teacher at an independent school in Hobart talked about his teaching in similar terms: 'We give them a balanced view', he said. 'We like to think it's a very balanced view rather than geared towards one side.'<sup>29</sup>

When a former Perth teacher reflected on what her students had enjoyed most about Australian history, she said they tended to remember the questions it raised in class. They would often say things like 'Well look, we thought it was going to be boring but we actually liked that bit about conscription and we liked the debate we had about the Anzac Legend, was it a myth not?'<sup>30</sup> This does not mean the Anzac story is not important to learn, however. 'Of course it's important', says Tanya, a history teacher near Darwin. 'I mean the whole Anzac myth and Anzac Legend needs to be explained to them, especially when teaching them history, you're also making relevant links to the present and why we're here'.<sup>31</sup>

In an interview at an independent girls' school in Canberra, the students keenly expressed their different views on the topic. Morgan was insistent on its importance. 'I think war defines us', she said. 'It's just part of our history and we need to know it.' Annie wasn't so sure:

I kind of think though, not to be completely unpatriotic or whatever, but we have a very American outlook on it. Like when they teach Australian history they're like, 'Oh Australians finally got into the war and we got a chance at the world and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah'. But the actual emphasis of the war was that it started in Europe, so the action was in Europe, and it's involving all the European countries.<sup>32</sup>

I was struck by the way these girls discussed the influence of war on Australia's national character *themselves* – they grappled with questions of national history and identity without reverting to a simple reading of the past. In fact, far from being challenged by discussion and debate in class, many students and their teachers insist that is precisely what makes history relevant and engaging.

## Conclusion

Many Australians believe history should be a source of pride, and that young people should have an affirming national story with appropriate heroes and values to aspire to, but are we actually any closer to defining what it means to be Australian? The values framework certainly refined and presented worthy ideals, but it quickly became bogged down in a politicised and exclusive debate over national identity. The Anzac revival has clearly resonated with many students, and as they flock to honour Australia's wartime past their

growing commemoration of Simpson and other Anzac legends in the classroom needs to be accommodated. But it needs to be done so that their own understandings and values are expanded rather than limited to a simplistic or uncontested national narrative. As long as there is social and political pressure to define our national character, surely the best way for students to deal with contrasting ideas about Australian history and identity is to bring the discussion into the classroom. That way they can actually *contribute* to the debate itself.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 John Howard and Brendan Nelson, 'The Australian Government's Agenda for Schools – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity' (Brendan Nelson Media Centre, 2004), available online from: [http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson/jun\\_04/npm\\_220604.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson/jun_04/npm_220604.htm) (accessed 27 May 2007).
- 2 'Values Education Study Final Report' (Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation, 2003).
- 3 Anna Clark, 'Flying the Flag for Mainstream Australia', *Griffith REVIEW*, 11, Autumn 2006: 107-112.
- 4 This research project has been funded by a Discovery Grant from the Australian Research Council. The investigators are Tony Taylor and Anna Clark from Monash University, Stuart Macintyre from the University of Melbourne, and Carmel Young from the University of Sydney. The project began in September 2005 and is due to finish in 2008. Twenty curriculum officials from each of the states and territories were also interviewed for this project, and about 80 students, teachers and curriculum designers were interviewed in Canada as a comparative study.
- 5 Julie Edwards, 'Researching the Development of Historical Consciousness in Late Primary and Junior Secondary Students', *Curriculum Perspectives*, 25(1), 2005: 31-32.
- 6 Denise Meredyth, and Julian Thomas, 'A Civics Excursion: Ends and Means for Old and New Citizenship Education', *History of Education Review*, 28(2), 1999: 1-15; Civics Expert Group, 'Whereas the People ... Civics and Citizenship Education' (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1994). See also Carole Hooper, 'Values Education Study Literature Review', in *Values Education Study Final Report* (Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation, 2003): 169-212.
- 7 Samantha Hawley, 'Teach Australian values or "clear off"', says Nelson', *The World at Noon* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), 24 August 2005, available online from: <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1445262.htm> (accessed on September 2005).
- 8 Samantha Hawley, 'Brendan Nelson addresses Islamic schools on Australian values', *PM* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), 24 August, 2005, available online from: <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1445094.htm> (accessed 22 September 2005); Ben Haywood, 'Battlelines drawn on values',

- The Age*, 4 September 2005, available online from: <http://www.education.theage.com.au/pagedetail.asp?intpageid=1542&strsection=students&intsectionid=0> (accessed 4 September 2005).
- 9 'Ryan', public high school, NSW Central Coast, 22 August 2006. (Notes in possession of author.) The names of students and teachers have been changed.
- 10 'Declan', Catholic boys school, Adelaide, 15 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 11 'Julia', public high school, Hobart 3 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 12 Interview with students, independent co-educational school, Hobart, 3 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 13 Bruce Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 185.
- 14 Paul Ashton & Paula Hamilton, 'At Home With the Past: Background and Initial Findings from the National Survey', *Australian Cultural History*, 22, 2003: 23-26; see also Graeme Davison, 'The Habit of Commemoration and the Revival of Anzac Day', *Australian Cultural History*, 22, 2003: 73-82.
- 15 Mark McKenna & Stuart Ward, "'It Was Really Moving, Mate": the Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies*, 129, 2007: 141-151.
- 16 Marilyn Lake, 'The Howard history of Australia', *The Age*, 20 August 2005, available online from: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2005/08/19/1124435138221.html#> (accessed 31 March 2006); Marilyn Lake, 'The militarisation of Australia's historical memory', *Teaching History*, 40(1), March 2006: 15-16. See also Clare Wright, 'Placing the answer before the question betrays a closed mind', *The Age*, 13 September 2006, available online from: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/placing-the-answer-before-the-question-betrays-a-closed-mind/2006/09/12/1157826938565.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1> (accessed 17 November 2007).
- 17 Interview with students, public senior college, Perth, 24 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 18 Denis Shemilt, 'The Devil's Locomotive', *Australian History Teacher*, 7, 1980: 13-25; *History 13-16: Evaluation Study. School Council (GB) History 13-16 Project* (Edinburgh: Holmes, McDougall Ltd, 1980); 'The Caliph's Coin: The Currency of Narrative Frameworks in History Teaching', in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York & London: New York University Press, 2000): 83-101.
- 19 Linda Levstik, 'Articulating the Silences: Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of Historical Significance', in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York & London: New York University Press, 2000): 284-305.
- 20 Peter Seixas, 'The Purposes of Teaching Canadian History', *Canadian Social Studies*, 36(2) 2002, available online from: [http://www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css/Css\\_36\\_2/Arpurposes\\_teaching\\_canadian\\_history.htm](http://www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css/Css_36_2/Arpurposes_teaching_canadian_history.htm) (accessed 15 July 2002).
- 21 Peter Seixas, 'Introduction', in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006): 3-24; 'What is Historical Consciousness?', in *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory, and Citizenship in Canada*, edited by Ruth Sandwell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006): 11-22; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Peter Lee, 'Understanding History', paper given to Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, 2002, available online from: <http://www.cshc.ubc.ca/viewabstract.php?id=5> (accessed 3 March, 2003).
- 22 Tony Taylor & Carmel Young, *Making History: A Guide for the Teaching and Learning of History in Australian Schools* (Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003), available online from: <http://www.hyperhistory.org/images/assets/pdf/complete.pdf> (accessed 5 July 2006).
- 23 'Ophelia', independent co-educational school, Adelaide, 14 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 24 'Cameron', history teacher, Catholic boys' school, Perth, 23 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 25 'Jessica', history teacher, public high school, Brisbane, 25 July 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 26 'Jiang', independent girls' school, Brisbane, 24 July 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 27 Interview with students, public high school, NSW Central Coast, 22 August 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 28 'Lara', history teacher, public high school, Adelaide, 13 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 29 'Andrew', history teacher, independent co-ed school, Hobart, 3 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 30 Jan Bishop, former history teacher, Perth, 23 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.) Jan agreed to be identified for this research.
- 31 'Tanya', history teacher, public high school, NT, 22 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)
- 32 Interview with students, independent girls school, Canberra, 17 August 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

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